THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Foolishness of it All

March 14, 1999

John M. Buchanan

Jesus is the face of God who is encountered in everyday life, wherever the brokenness of the world can no longer be ignored. He is the incomprehensible love of God come to live among the poor and despicable, the Lord who cannot show them the human side of his divinity without showing them the divine side of their own humanity. He is the wounded healer who turns the expectations of the world upside down, making glory out of humiliation, making victory out of defeat, making life out of death.

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God in Pain

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE FOOLISHNESS OF IT ALL

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
John 9:1-12
1Corinthians 1:18-25

". . .God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. . ." 1Corinthians1:25

Dear God, we follow our Lord through these days of Lent, and as his obedience to you deepens and he walks toward the city of his destiny, we find our hearts and spirits suddenly open and vulnerable. Touch us this day with your spirit, and give us faith to hear the old story of his love once again and to know that the story is about us. Amen,

A small plane took off from a runway on an island in Puget Sound, cleared the tree tops, and suddenly the single engine sputtered and failed. The plane dropped, a wing clipped a tree, and the plane crashed to the ground. It carried two passengers: seven year old Julie Norwich and the pilot, her father Jesse. He pulled his daughter from the plane just as the fuel exploded: a glob of burning kerosene hit Julie's face and burned her severely and deeply. No one else was burned or hurt in any way.

One of the people in the nearest village was Annie Dillard, a good, strong writer who grew up Presbyterian and who continues to deal with questions of theology and the mystery of nature and the holy in life. Dillard never backs away from anything human. So she wrote a remarkable little book, *Holy the Firm.* It's almost poetry. Frederick Buechner called it "a rare and precious book."

After describing the accident in her lean and powerful prose, Dillard writes, "The joke of the world is less like a banana peel than a rake, the old rake in the grass, the one you step on, foot to forehead. It all comes together in a twinkling. You have to admire the gag for its symmetry. . ...Has he no power? . . .The one great god abandoned us to. . . time's tumult of occasions. . . ." p.43

Dillard probes the issue of God, God's will, God's power in this dreadful incident, and recalls the incident described in the Gospel lesson this morning.

> "His disciples asked Christ about a roadside beggar who had been blind since birth, 'Who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind? And Christ, who spat on the ground, made a mud of spittle and clay, plastered mud over the man's eyes and gave him sight, answered, 'Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God be made manifest in him.' 'Really?' asks Dillard. 'Blindness to manifest the works of God? What (in the world) is going on here?'"(p.60).

It is, of course, the oldest question in human history; a question we all asked last week as we read about three little children in Naperville, and the very next day a fine young Chicago police officer, whose new wife, through her tears, called him "my sweetie," killed in a routine investigation. Why, dear God, is this necessary? Is there some purpose here which we are missing? Is there meaning here that we cannot see? Dear God, are you

doing this to us to teach us something? Are you allowing it to happen, and if so, why? Is there some mystical cause and effect at work here? Did we do something wrong? "Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

The question is posed powerfully in the play *Shadowlands* by William Nicholson. It's about C.S. Lewis' relationship with an American divorcee, Joy Davidson, who was one of his avid followers. They became friends. Lewis was a life-long confirmed bachelor. But he married Davidson in order to satisfy immigration regulations, as a favor, although they remained merely friends. Then Joy Davidson became ill. But now Lewis was in love. So he married her a second time, in the hospital. They had a short time of wonderful life together and then her cancer returned and she died.

In the play he asks:

> "If God loves us, why does He allow us to suffer so much? . . . What possible point can there be to such tragedy? Isn't God supposed to be good?"

A clergyman friend tries to comfort Lewis. "We have to have faith that God knows." Lewis responds, "God knows. Yes, God knows. I don't doubt that. But does God care? Did God care about Joy?"

The question of suffering, particularly innocent suffering, takes us immediately into very deep water theologically. It seems like you can't think about suffering without thinking about God, and God's relationship to suffering. Does God cause it, allow it, use it, or endure it like we do? Does God care? Does God exist?

And it is precisely at this point—this poignantly human plea for understanding, for mercy, which one day everyone of us will utter—it is precisely here that the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes a bold and provocative assertion—about God and about us. "We proclaim Christ crucified," St. Paul put it.

In his letter to the early Christian church in Corinth, St. Paul almost playfully describes it as foolishness, and that it was in contrast to the alternatives.

The Greek culture in which St. Paul and the early Christian church lived had no objection to the notion of monotheism. Plato had taught that goodness was one—that there was one absolute good, one god. The Greeks rather liked the idea. Their philosophers reasoned that if god was one, god must be perfect. God must need nothing. God must want nothing. It's very logical. There is even a word for it in Greek—*apatheia*—from which we get the word apathy. It means the absolute, metaphysical perfection of God.

We preach Christ crucified, Paul said—foolishness to Greek thinkers who want a god of perfection, and a god who transcends human life, its messiness, its pain and suffering, and also its passion and ecstasy.

The other alternative was expressed by the Judaism of the day, though not the faith described in Hebrew scripture. That is our faith too. The God of the Old Testament, the Jewish god, is the God we worship. This alternative is a theology shaped by the experience of the Hebrew people at that point in time, the first century; the experience of military defeat, oppression, weakness in the face of the overwhelming power of Rome. So

God, and God's messiah, are seen in powerful, military, monarchical categories. God will come and drive out the oppressors and restore the throne of David. God's messiah will reign, truly reign, in the place of Caesar. He will be the King of the Jews, literally. And so Christ crucified was indeed a stumbling block. A crucified messiah was a contradiction in terms, an insult. A suffering God was an oxymoron. God doesn't suffer.

> "For the message about the cross is foolishness . . . a stumbling block. . . .but God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Christian faith is about a God who is not perfect in the Greek philosophic sense of the word, but a God who has wants and desires, a God who laughs and weeps, who rejoices and grieves, a God capable of anger and remorse and profound love, a God who, because of love, suffers.

So when we talk about suffering and God, we begin with this God, the God who experiences suffering for the sake of love; the God who is vulnerable.

Does God cause suffering? Does God send tragedy and sickness to teach us something? Did God cause Julie's airplane engine to fail? I cannot personally believe that God is responsible for human suffering. Sometimes I think we attribute suffering to God's will because we don't know what else to say or believe. "It was God's will" is at least something.

William Sloane Coffin's son, Alex, died in a tragic accident when, after drinking a few too many beers, he missed a turn and drove his car into Boston Harbor. At the funeral a woman shook Coffin's hand and said something about accepting God's will. Coffin remembers "I wanted to jump out of my chair and say "Lady—no—this is not God's will. God did not will my son's death. In fact, God's heart was the first to break when Alex's car went down."

That, in simplest terms, is what we believe. Not that God causes suffering, but that God stands with us, shares our suffering, weeps with us, tastes our bitterness.

Could God prevent innocent suffering? It's tempting to answer that question too quickly, and I'm happy to leave it to the philosophers. Playwright Archibald Macleish said, "If God can and doesn't, God is not good. If God can't, God is not God." What I do know is that love involves risk and vulnerability. What I do know is that the very essence of human parenting is knowing the limitation of your love and power and influence. You cannot ultimately protect your child from all harm. One day you have to let go of the bike and allow them to pedal alone. You feed them and dress them warmly and warn them to look both ways before crossing the street, but if you love them there comes a day when you do not and cannot protect them from all risks and all harm. Love means vulnerability. God is love. God is most like a nursing mother, a waiting father. God gives freedom because God loves and when tragedy results, God shares it, and stands beside us, and holds us up in the midst of it.

In our time no one event so provokes the question of God and suffering as the Holocaust; and no one has struggled with it more eloquently and profoundly than Jewish philosopher and author, Elie Wiesel.

In one of the most dramatic incidents in his book *Night,* the author remembers the day at Auschwitz when the SS hanged two Jewish men and a boy in front of the entire camp:

> " 'Where is God: Where is he' someone asked behind me. 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer, 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.'" (p.75)

And you're not sure whether Wiesel means that God is dead, that the traditional idea of an all powerful and loving God is now dead, or whether he means that the vulnerable God of scripture, the God of the exile, the Good Shepherd who walks through the valley of the shadow with his flock, the God of the cross, enters into human suffering so profoundly as to be there—even there—in that place of human obscenity and sin.

Wiesel has struggled with the issue ever since. But last fall he wrote a prayer for Rosh Hashanah—

> "Master of the universe, let us make up ....I have written harsh words, burning words about your role in our tragedy....Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? What was going on in heaven while your children were marked for humiliation, isolation and death only because they were Jewish?
> . . . These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades. . . At one point, I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. . . . Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?"

That, it seems to me, is very close to what St. Paul wrote two thousand years ago . . .We proclaim Christ crucified.

There is a lot about our cultural situation that is not particularly amenable to our theology of the cross. There is a lot about our culture that wants religion to be therapeutically helpful, uplifting, and positive. William Willimon tells about a church which put a realistic, rough cross in front and merchants asked that it be removed. It was unpleasant, not good for business, they said. There is a lot about the culture that celebrates accumulating, earning, winning, succeeding, building financial security; not vulnerability, sacrifice, suffering, dying.

But in Lent, as we approach once again a week we call Holy because it ends on a hill outside the city where Jesus is crucified, we Christians are called to ponder the cross, to wrestle with the most difficult questions and to stand for a while, as the hymn puts it, beneath the cross of Jesus.

The critical claim of Christian faith is that the death of Jesus of Nazareth was for us, that it has to do with ultimate issues—our salvation. Christian faith makes the radical proposal that the goal of life is not to protect yourself from suffering, but to make yourself vulnerable, to expose yourself to suffering for the sake of love. The goal is not, that is to

say, to save your life, but to find some way to give it away. The claim is that the cross is more than a symbol of tragedy but, because it is God's own son on the cross, it is supremely, mysteriously, but profoundly a symbol of love.

In the elegant motion picture *The Thin Red Line,* about the battle of Guadacanal in 1942, an American patrol, scouting for a battalion, confronts a large force of enemy troops advancing through the jungle. The battalion has to be warned. One GI steps forward, sends the others down stream to warn their friends. Alone he holds off the enemy until ultimately he is surrounded. In one final act of defiant courage and sacrifice and deepest love, he fires his rifle and of course is killed while his friends escape.

Foolishness—God's love—wiser than human wisdom—weakness stronger than human strength.

It was a turning point for me when I finally saw the mystery and majesty of it. I was a first year divinity school student, a little skeptical, cynical even, just about convinced that the cross of Jesus was proof that suffering, tragedy, injustice were the final realities in life and the death of that good man was the final evidence of the futility of it all. A friend, a little older and wiser said, "Just remember John, what happened on the cross is not simply something people did to Jesus, it is also something God has done for us, for the world, for you."

So that is what I remember every year at this time.

"Beneath the cross of Jesus
Two wonders I confess
The wonder of redeeming love
And my unworthiness.

Amen